

Video Relay Services

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Video Relay Service (VRS) is a form of Telecommunications Relay Service (TRS) that enables persons with hearing disabilities to use sign language to communicate with voice telephone users through video equipment, rather than through typed text. Video equipment links the VRS user with a TRS operator – called a “communications assistant” (CA) – so that the VRS user and the CA can see and communicate with each other in signed conversation. Because the conversation between the VRS user and the CA flows much more quickly than with a text-based TRS call, VRS has become an enormously popular form of TRS.

How VRS Works

VRS, like other forms of TRS, allows persons who are deaf or hard of hearing to communicate through the telephone system with hearing persons. The VRS caller, using a television or a computer with a video camera device and (generally) a broadband (high speed) Internet connection, contacts a VRS CA, who is a qualified sign language interpreter. They communicate with each other in sign language through a video link. The VRS CA then places a telephone call to the party the VRS user wishes to call. The VRS CA relays the conversation back and forth between the parties -- in sign language with the VRS user, and by voice with the called party. No typing or text is involved. A voice telephone user can also initiate a VRS call by calling a VRS center, usually through a toll-free number.

The VRS CA can be reached through the VRS provider's Internet site, or through video equipment attached to a television. Currently, more than a half dozen providers offer VRS. Consumers can use any provider they choose to handle the call. Like all TRS calls, VRS is free to the caller. VRS providers are compensated for their costs from the Interstate TRS Fund, which the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) oversees.

Benefits of VRS

VRS has quickly become a very popular service. It offers several features not available with other text-based forms of TRS:

- VRS allows deaf and hard of hearing persons to communicate in their native language, American Sign Language (ASL), instead of having to type what they want to say.
- Because consumers using VRS communicate in sign language, they are able to more fully express themselves through facial expressions and body language, which cannot be expressed in text.
- A VRS call flows back and forth just like a telephone conversation between two hearing persons. For example, the parties can interrupt each other, which they cannot do with a TRS call using a TTY (where the parties have to take turns communicating with the CA).
- Because the conversation flows more naturally back and forth between the parties, the conversation can take place much more quickly than with text-based TRS. As a result, the same conversation is much shorter through VRS than it would be through other forms of text-based TRS.

(More)



Special Rules for VRS

VRS is different from some of the other forms of TRS in two important ways: (1) the conversation between the VRS user and the CA is made through a video link and sign language, rather than typed text; and (2) the service relies on the Internet, rather than the telephone system, for the connection between the VRS user and the CA. It is a relatively new service and, unlike some other forms of TRS, it is not mandatory. Not all of the rules that apply to other forms of TRS apply to VRS:

- VRS is currently not required to be available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (but some VRS providers may offer service 24/7).
- The “speed of answer” rule does not apply to VRS. That means it may take longer to reach a VRS CA to place a VRS call than it would to reach a CA to place a text-based TRS call. If a consumer does not want to wait for a VRS CA to handle his or her call, the consumer can always try using a different provider’s service.
- Unlike with some of the other forms of TRS, VRS users cannot select which long distance company they want to handle their call. At the same time, there is no long distance service charge to the VRS user.
- Unlike with some of the other forms of TRS, the VRS CA may not be able to offer or handle some call services, such as operator-assisted calls and 900 (pay-per-call) calls.

- For emergency calls (for example, calling the fire or police department), a VRS CA may not be able to automatically direct the call to the appropriate emergency service provider or know your location. TRS and VRS should not be used for emergency calls. Emergency calls should be placed by dialing 911 directly on a TTY using the regular telephone network.

VRS Consumers Beware

The FCC has received a number of complaints about VRS and certain improper marketing practices. As a consumer of VRS, you should know that:

- The TRS rules do not require you to choose or use only one VRS provider. You can choose any of several different providers of VRS.
- Accepting VRS equipment from one provider does not prohibit you from using another VRS provider on other equipment you may have.
- A VRS provider may not install VRS equipment so that your Internet connection works only with that provider’s equipment, unless you expressly agree to this.
- VRS (and TRS) providers may not offer you financial incentives to use their service or to make more or longer VRS (or TRS) calls.
- Preferential treatment of calls is prohibited. VRS (and TRS) providers must handle calls in the order in which they are received. They cannot selectively answer calls from certain consumers or certain locations.

(More) ↑

(More) →



- VRS is not the same as Video Remote Interpreting (VRI), which is the use of an interpreter located at a remote location through a video connection when two people are together and they need an interpreter. VRS may not be used in such circumstances. VRS is a type of telephone call. If two or more persons who are together need an interpreter, they must use an "in person" interpreter or a VRI service for which a fee is generally charged – not VRS.

How to File a Complaint

If you believe a provider is violating the FCC's rules or you think you've been subject to any improper practice regarding TRS or VRS, you may file a written complaint with the FCC.

(More) ↑
→

Include your name, address, a telephone or TTY number where you can be reached during the business day, and the name of the provider involved on your complaint letter. You should also provide:

- An explanation of the circumstances leading to your complaint;
- The names and telephone numbers of the provider's employees that you talked to in an effort to resolve your complaint;
- The dates that you talked with these employees; and
- Any other information that would help the FCC to process your complaint.

Mail your complaint to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints
Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554

To file a complaint electronically, go to www.fcc.gov/cgb/complaints.html. You can file by e-mail at fccinfo@fcc.gov or fax your complaint to 1-866-418-0232.

###

For this or any other consumer publication in an accessible format (electronic ASCII text, Braille, large print, or audio) please write or call us at the address or phone number below, or send an e-mail to FCC504@fcc.gov.

To receive information on this and other FCC consumer topics through the Commission's electronic subscriber service, click on www.fcc.gov/cgb/emailservice.html.

050318

This document is for consumer education purposes only and is not intended to affect any proceeding or cases involving this subject matter or related issues.

